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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues pertaining to at-risk students at the primary level, suggesting what can be done to keep pupils in formal schooling with an optimal achievement level. Topics discussed include: (1) probable at-risk primary pupils; (2) the domestic and societal causes of high risk in primary pupils; (3) approaches to guiding pupil achievement in light of probable deficiencies; (4) teaching mathematics to at-risk pupils; (5) parental involvement; and (6) achieving a balance between attitudinal, knowledge, and skills objectives in science and social studies curricula for at-risk pupils. (TE)

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THE AT RISK PUPIL

[Marlow Ediger]

Much of educational literature pertaining to the at risk student emphasizes the secondary level of schooling. Instead, the writer wishes to focus attention upon the early years of formal schooling of pupils, namely the primary years. To focus upon the high school years only, to identify and remediate potential dropouts, misses the goal of retaining pupils in formal education. It is too late for the secondary school to attempt to retain pupils solely. Problems in achievement may well occur at a very young age. These problems might be solved much more readily at a younger age, as compared to the high school level only. This is not to say that nothing should be done to identify and remediate at risk tendencies of secondary school pupils. Setting attainable goals for learner attainment should be possible at any age and grade level. The balance of this paper will stress what can be done to keep pupils in formal schooling with an optimal achievement level.

Probable At Risk Primary Pupils

Each curriculum area is different from others in terms of goals stressed, kinds of learning opportunities offered, as well as appraisal procedures emphasized. Also, methods of teaching, philosophies of education, subject matter emphasized, and procedures of instruction implemented might well differ from one curricululm area to the next. Thus, many variable are involved in teaching-learning situations. A quality curriculum needs to be available for at risk pupils.

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Learners differ from each other in many ways. These differences include interests, goals, purposes, values, and motivation. Individual differences among pupils need to be provided for, especially the at risk pupil.

Why at Risk?

The home and society has many responsibilities in caring for and educating pupils. Home and societal arenas fail our pupils in many ways. These include

1. poverty and very low income levels.
2. substandard housing as well as overcrowded members in a house.
3. drug abuse which hurts the user as well as the offspring from addicted mothers.
4. violence in extreme forms.
5. lack of jobs, including minimal wage positions.
6. segregated areas of housing, as well as partially segregated schools.
7. parental lack of interest in offspring.
8. educational opportunities lacking in the home as well as larger environment. Very limited amounts are spent on educating pupils in the school setting.

9. inadequate health care for pupils.

10. lack of prenatal/natal care of prospective mothers.

There perhaps is little the school can do to improve where society has failed drastically in meeting needs of pupils. Pupils growing up in slum areas have indeed few opportunities to achieve, develop, and grow academically. And yet, the school is asked to help all pupils to become excellent readers and prevent dropouts from leaving school. School personnel then need to do the best possible for all pupils, regardless of circumstances.

Guiding Pupil Achievement

The school, as an institution, must remedy where home and society have failed.

Young pupils in the early primary years may experience failure in learning to read. Too many pupils in a classroom makes it difficult for even the best of teachers to teach reading and monitor individual progress. The writer recently observed thirty-two wiggly, energetic first graders in a classroom. It was a marvel that the teacher and the student teacher were able to teach reading as well as was done. To monitor thirty-two pupils with a somewhat short attention span if they were attending to the six new words printed neatly in manuscript style was indeed difficult. Each pupil needs to view the new words carefully in order to be able to identify them in print when later reading contextually. Learners individually need to be able to utilize each

word being introduced in a holistic sentence. Meaning is then attached to abstract words printed in manuscript letters. Background subject matter must be possessed by pupils prior to reading a given selection. The attention span of each pupil must be adequate to listen to the background content in order to understand the selection that will be read. Hopefully, learners will raise questions and develop needed curiosity. When reading the content, pupils may secure information directly related to their questions.

Selected pupils will bring the following deficiencies to the above learning opportunities:

1. a short attention span.

2. limited experiences for their age level. A deprived child will greatly lack subject matter knowledge directly related to the story to be read.

3. minimal reading skills in word recognition, such as use of phonics, syllabication, structural analysis, context clues, configuration, as well as picture clues.

4. lack of interest in the story to be read.

5. deficiency in needed attitudes to achieve adequately in reading.

6. inability to read in thought units.

7. not able to concentrate on the task at hand.

8. inadequate motivation to pursue reading comprehension activities.

9. faulty habits of reading content.

10. lack of parental involvement in assisting pupils to read.

Early primary grade pupils at risk in reading need identification. Reading materials need to provide for the present achievement level of each pupil. Subject matter too complex to read might make for failure in achievement. Being unable to read effectively, the pupil as the formal years of schooling progress, becomes increasingly at risk and desires to drop out of school. Content too easy to read might well make for feelings of boredom. If reading tasks are not challenging, motivation will be lacking. Even gifted students may then be at risk and eventually become dropouts. Reading materials need to be on the instructional, not frustrational level. Subject matter too complex to read makes for frustrating experiences for students. Reading is a curriculum area which cuts across all academic areas such as science, social studies, and mathematics. Thus reading well and with comprehension is a must for each pupil. Pupils not achieving this goal might well become dropouts in the ensuing years. Providing for optimal achievement on the part of each pupil may well have tremendous holding power for each learner. To avoid at risk in reading, pupils need to be successful learners.

Stimulating, varied methods should be utilized in the teaching of reading. The reading teacher should avoid sameness of learning

opportunities. Thus excessive use of worksheets and workbooks hinders interest in reading and learning to read. Too much stress in pupils analyzing words such as in phonics instruction and dividing words into syllables emphasizes a fragmented reading curriculum. Reading consists of acquiring interesting ideas and subject matter rather than separating words excessively into component parts such as phoeneme/grapheme relationships as well as dividing words into meaningful parts as aids to word recognition. Facts, concepts, and generalizations that are vital for pupil acquisition should be emphasized. Reading should be holistic in terms of subject matter acquired instead of heavy emphasis placed upon analyzing words. In and of itself, tasks involving separating words into specific parts (phonics and syllabication) does not stress meaningful experiences in securing subject matter content.

To emphasize holism in reading instruction, early primary grade pupils need to read complete stories from basal readers as well as from library books. Learners need to have a voice in selecting content to be read, such as self-selection of sequential library books to read. The library books should be on diverse reading levels as well contain subject matter on a variety of topics. Pupils with teacher guidance may then be involved in sequencing their own activities and experiences. Sequence then resides within the pupils, not within the teacher, in worksheets, and in workbooks. The at risk pupil may feel successful when selecting sequential library books to read which he/she feels to be of interest, meaning, and purpose.

To assist at risk early primary pupils in reading, the writer recommends

1. deemphasizing analytic methods such as heavy stress placed upon phonics and dividing words into syllables methods of instruction. Analytic approaches in teaching reading to at risk pupils should be emphasized as the need arises.

2. using holistic approaches in teaching reading such as learners reading their own ideas printed in neat manuscript letters by the teacher. The teacher then guides early primary grade pupils to read their own recorded experiences.

3. implementing quality sequence in reading whereby success in learning is in evidence at each level of instruction.

4. reading for enjoyment to develop quality attitudes. Good attitudes toward reading might well minimize many problems in reading faced by any one pupil.

5. locating materials from which individual at risk early primary grade pupils can benefit. The reading materials need to be on the understanding, not the frustrational level of reading.

At Risk Pupils in Mathematics

Society expects pupils to become proficient in mathematics as well as in the previously discussed curriculum area of reading.

Early primary grade at risk pupils may have an extremely short attention span in mathematics. An adequate attention span is needed to concentrate, to think critically and creatively, as well as to acquire

vital facts, concepts, and generalizations in mathematics. Variety in learning opportunities may well assist to increase attention span for pupils to achieve an objective. Concrete materials such as pencils, crayons, large sticks, and chalk, among other markers, should be utilized to teach early primary grade at risk pupils addition and subtraction. In sequence, semi-concrete materials should follow in teaching-learning situations. Semi-concrete materials include the utilization of illustrations, filmstrips, films, video-tapes, and slides to teach addition, subtraction, number concepts, and generalizations. Use of the symbolic may then follow which states in a number sentence that which was shown in the concrete and the semi-concrete.

A second problem in teaching mathematics pertains to a lack of background experiences relating directly to mathematics. Here, the early primary grade teacher might assist at risk pupils to think of number concepts in the real world. Thus, the teacher guides pupils to notice number concepts when each school day in sequence is checked off on a calendar. Pupils count how many will eat lunch in school or have brought their lunch along to eat. In the morning and/or afternoon, pupils count how many will be drinking milk during break time. Also, pupils may count and keep record of learner absences, among other real life experiences. A rich background of experiences needs to be in the offing for at risk pupils.

Third, at risk pupils need guidance from the teacher in pronouncing needed words in story problems. When reading problems arise in mathematics, young learners need assistance and necessary help. A rich reading vocabulary in mathematics must be attained.

To develop interest in mathematics, the teacher needed to utilize inductive or learning by discovery approaches as well as deductive procedures. For variety, problem solving also needs to be emphasized. At risk early primary grade pupils need assistance to lengthen their individual attentions spans; varied methodologies of teaching should increase attending to the tasks being pursued.

Remedial work will need adequate emphasis for at risk learners. The teacher needs to diagnose that which causes problems in specific learning situations. Based on diagnosis, the teacher may remedy what pupils did not understand. Improved sequence in learning should be an end result of diagnosis followed by remediation.

Not being able to concentrate adequately on the task at hand hinders learner progress in mathematics. At risk pupils need guidance to stay on task. Study skills of these learners need adequate development. Reinforcement tactics (primary and secondary) might well be utilized to improve time on task. Learning ultimately should be its own reward. Intrinsic motivation is/should be an end result. Reinforcers should be utilized to assist pupils to attend and learn, not to become addicted to reinforcement methods.

At risk pupils tend to have low motivation to achieve objectives in the curriculum. To stimulate early primary grade pupils in mathematics, the teacher needs to guide learners to understand what is being presented in ongoing learning opportunities. Once pupils understand subject matter presented, they can be challenged to achieve new objectives. Rewards, intrinsic and extrinsic, should follow immediate learner achievement of objectives emphasizing challenge. Enrichment

experiences in mathematics which motivate, encourage, and stress high expectations for learners should also be present in mathematics. At risk early primary grade pupils need to attain high expectations in mathematics.

Parental involvement in helping their offspring to achieve should be in evidence. The teacher and parents need to work cooperatively to guide each son/daughter to achieve as much as possible. Specific means of assisting each child to achieve optimally in mathematics should be an end result of parent involvement in the curriculum.

Science and social studies objectives for at risk early primary grade pupils should meet definite criteria. One relevant criterion for selecting objectives stresses pupils perceiving purpose in learning. To perceive purpose deductively, the teacher may explain to pupils use that can be made of what is being taught in mathematics. Inductive perceived purpose might stress the teacher raising questions as to how the newly presented facts, concepts, and generalizations in science and social may be utilized in school and in society.

Individual differences among at risk pupils need adequate provision. At risk early primary grade pupils differ from each other in many ways such as capacity to learn, achievement, interests, and motivation. The classroom teacher needs to study and learn much about each pupil. The information secured should be utilized to teach each pupil to achieve more optimally in science and in the social studies.

Balance among knowlege, skills, and attitudinal goals needs to be in evidence in teaching-learning situations. Attitudinal ends are vital for early primary grade at risk pupils to achieve. Quality attitudes

assist these puils to attain knowledge and skills goals. Too frequently, at risk pupils have experienced failure in the home and community setting. Young learners, rather, need to feel successful and develop quality attitudes of an adequate self concept. With an adquate self concept, at risk pupils feel they can and might well attain wholesome attitudes. Feelings of success develop quality attitudes of an adequate self concept. With an adequate self concept, at risk pupils feel they can and might well attain wholesome attitudes. Feelings of failure develop negative attitudes on the part of pupils. Appropriate sequence in learning guides at risk pupils to improve the attitudinal dimension.

Knowledge goals to be achieved by at risk pupils should stress the acquisition of vital facts, concepts, and generalizations. Trivia and the unimportant need to be eliminated. Careful selection of relevant subject matter in science and in social studies is a must.

Skills objectives also need careful selection by educators so that important, salient goals are emphasized. Skills goals need to emphasize what is useful, utilitarian, and attainable. Skills of critical and creative thinking, as well as problem solving are highly important to stress in science and social studies.

Thus balance among attitudinal, knowledge, and skills objectives in science and social studies is a must for at risk early primary grade pupils. Developing good attitudes, in particular, assists at risk pupils to achieve more optimally in science and in social studies.

A quality science and social studies curriculum, in summary, emphasizes

1. pupils perceiving purpose or reasons for attaining vital objectives.
2. pupils achieving optimally on an individual basis.
3. pupils experiencing knowledge, skills, and attitudinal goals. Rational balance needs to be in evidence in emphasizing at risk early primary grade pupils achieving all three kinds of objectives.
4. pupils experiencing variety in learning opportunities so that each experiences success and interest in the science/social studies curriculum.
5. pupils interacting with modern technology including computer/software utilization. Quality software needs to meet personal needs of at risk pupils. Thus software/computer use should include drill and practice, simulations, games, as well as tutorial programs.

In Closing

At risk early primary grade pupils should experience continuous progress in each curriculum area. Quality sequence in goals stressed in teaching-learning situations is a must. Sequential opportunities in learning should make for success in achievement. Each at risk early primary grade pupil needs recognition and acceptance as a human being having much worth.